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# Learners, Initiators, Servants: The Self-Images of Victorian Principals in the 1990s

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## Abstract

*The professional self-images of principals are integrally related to how they perceive and exercise leadership in specific school settings. This study of a balanced sample of male and female leaders from a cross-section of Victorian schools in the late 1990s reveals that there are key variations related to sectorial identity, level and scale of school, institutional histories and even student gender. It supports the development of nuanced theories about leadership and gender that combat essentialist stereotypes which have dominated in past discourse. It also combats simplistic claims based on school level, sector and student gender. The findings carry implications for principal selection and development which require fine-grained discernment by practitioners and theorists in the future.*

## Introduction

Professional self-image refers to how individuals see themselves in specific roles in worksites (Goffman 1980). It relates to personal identity and influences professional attitudes, values, policy and action. Foucault's (1977) notion of the interpenetration of public and subjective realms implies that self-image is an essential element in the shaping of workers and professionals. A principal who sees him/herself as a servant to disadvantaged communities is likely to espouse and implement different values and policies in schools than one committed to self-actualisation in a competitive marketplace. Self-image helps shape the agency of principals. It is an aspect of the *emotional resources* (Goleman et al. 2002) that combine with *cognitive horsepower* (Lakomski 1998) to fire the engine of leadership.

Context is a key variable that must be considered in any study of school leaders. Fennell's (1999) recent analysis of Canadian women leaders indicates that it is likely to shape self-perceptions. One subject was adamant that she viewed herself differently

in each of the schools in which she had been a principal (Fennell 1999). A key research question is therefore to determine the extent to which factors such as level and size of school, institutional and sectorial traditions and student gender shape self-concept. A related, but frequently neglected, question relates to the role of the gender of the principal. Another is whether inherited images survive or mutate in contexts characterised by significant change.

This study conducted in Victorian schools in the late 1990s investigated whether principal self-image was directly related to employment structures and authorities. Did government school leaders see themselves as instruments of the bureaucratic state? Were those in church schools more inclined to identify with religious metaphors? Did those from independent sites value images of professional autonomy above those of public accountability?

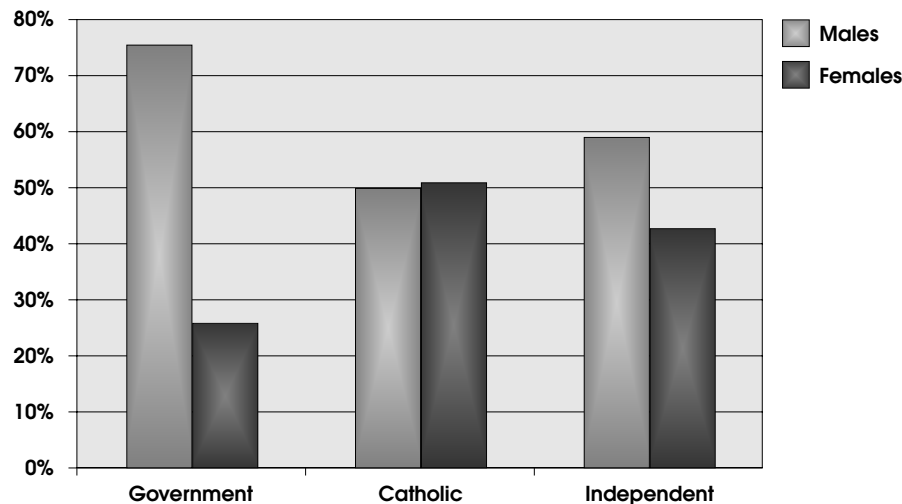
Another question was whether location in a primary or secondary site introduced important variations. Did different organisational scales between the two levels, where pupil numbers ranged from less than 100 to more than 1000 pupils, contribute to this? A further question was whether coeducational or single-sex sites produced further variations. The unequal distribution of male and female principals throughout different types of schools also raised other questions. Did men and women identify with different professional self-images and were these reinforced or modified by their locations in the schooling landscape? Finally, did the climate of change itself generate new images that principals embraced?

## Context

Victoria is the second most populous Australian state. It contains the second largest government school system and the largest Catholic sector in the country. The majority of sites in these sectors tend to be either primary (Prep to Grade 6) or secondary (Year 7 to 12) schools. Most are coeducational. There are also many independent schools that contain both primary and secondary classes and single-sex sites are common in this sector. Approximately 28 per cent of the schooling population is in non-government sites in Victoria, which is markedly higher than the national average of 21 per cent (ABS 1998, Marginson 1997). In this regard, the Victorian landscape differs sharply from those of Britain, Europe and the US where the vast majority of schools are 'public'.

There were 2259 principals in Victoria in 1996 (Curriculum Corporation 1996). Of these 76 per cent were in primary sites and 24 per cent in secondary schools. The distribution according to gender was particularly uneven. The proportion of females was much higher at

primary than secondary levels (62% compared to 25%). There was also great variation according to sector.



**Figure 1: Distribution of principals according to gender and sector**

(Curriculum Corporation (1996) Victorian Schools Database)

The disparity in the number of men and women was most marked in the government and independent sectors, whereas the number of females was marginally higher than the males in the Catholic sector.

There was also considerable stratification according to cultural and economic capital across the sectors. Government and Catholic schools, with minor exceptions, draw students from broad publics and are frequently local or regional in nature. Most independent schools charge fees which limit access to them and are consequently viewed as elite or selective in nature (Marginson 1997, Teese 2000). However, this sector also contains community, ethnic and religious schools whose clienteles are comparable with those of the other two sectors.

The considerable structural, cultural and socioeconomic diversity of this schooling landscape was further complicated by contrasts between urban and rural populations and by ethnic differences. Teese (2000) has documented enormous variation in educational outcomes throughout the state. Students from affluent, Anglo-Celtic schools from the Catholic and independent sectors experience more success at the end of their schooling than those from other sites. Alternatively, those from working-class communities in both urban and rural areas and from specific ethnic groups have less successful outcomes.

The past two decades have witnessed ‘an unprecedented wave of change’ in public schooling throughout the world (Lam 2001, p. 346). Commentators frequently link this to the global impact of economic rationalism with its privileging of accountability, competition, devolution, efficiency, marketisation, productivity and structural reform (Lawton 1994, Marginson 1997, Lam 2001). Victoria was no exception to this wave of reform. In the 1990s the Schools of the Future Program sought to implement many of these values in the government sector. The emergence of curriculum standards frameworks, statewide testing of literacy and numeracy and the introduction of vocational agendas at the secondary level also had strong impacts on Catholic and independent schools (Collard and Pascoe 1995, Caldwell and Haywood 1998, Marginson 1997, Collard, forthcoming). The decade can therefore be seen as an era when the complex nature of Victorian schooling was subjected to unprecedented change (Limerick et al. 1998). Other scholars have documented the effects on the cultures and structures of schooling (Caldwell and Haywood 1998, Marginson 1997). However, there has been little comment upon how the changes affected the self-images of the principals who actually led the schools in the era.

Any study of reforms in schooling runs the danger of overstating the impact of particular initiatives and ignoring continuities and traditions that modify or simply resist the changes (Slaughter 1999). It is therefore important to acknowledge that the self-images of contemporary school principals are influenced by cultures and traditions from the past. Protherough (1984) has documented how military traditions shaped the emergent images of British headmasters in boys’ schools in the nineteenth century. Commentators on Australian school leadership have noted the persistence of paternalistic images of *solitary, hard-driving men* (Hansen 1986, Bate 1990, Gronn 1995). Traditional images of female leaders as *matriarchs* and *nurturers* can also be identified in the histories of girls’ schools (Fitzpatrick 1975, Gardiner 1977, Burren 1984, Theobald 1978, 1996). Researchers who have trained their lenses on public bureaucracies have noted other variations, especially amongst men, who view themselves as *line managers* and *public servants* responsible for issues of provision and accountability (Hearn 1993). Their counterparts in the non-government sectors frequently claim to exercise greater autonomy and less compliance with public accountabilities (Marginson 1997). The histories of church schools indicate further permutations ranging from the *fierce paternalism* of the early male principals at Methodist Ladies College (Zainu’ddin 1982) to the *compassionate masculinity* of particular Catholic clerics, which contradicts such traditions (Gamble 1982, McConville 1993). More recently, feminist writers have popularised images of women leaders as *weavers* and *networkers* (Adler et al. 1993, Ozga 1993, Dunlap 1995) and such concepts have percolated into the consciousness of contemporary leaders.

## Research method

Administrative theorists have pointed to the potency of visual imagery as a tool for studying organisations and beliefs (Parker 1993, Morgan 1997, Bessant 2002). Metaphors and symbols have affective qualities which evoke more than cognitive reactions. They embody qualities related to sense impressions and feelings which the more abstract language of traditional questionnaires fails to capture. Famous examples include Weber's image of the 'iron cage of bureaucracy' (1964) and Leithwood et al.'s 'swamp of administrative decision-making' (1992). Their portrayal of principalship as 'white water rafting' in the 1990s also evoked strong assent from Australian leaders.

In 1997 a questionnaire was administered to a stratified sample of 500 Victorian principals from all three sectors, both levels of schooling and a mixture of coeducational and segregated sites. In addition to exploring attitudes and beliefs about leadership it also sought to investigate professional self-image. The construction of the image statements drew upon those already acknowledged in leadership literature and some emergent themes from recent decades. It also took gender discourse into account by counterpointing isolated and aloof images which have been attributed to male leaders against more relational models which have been linked to females (Gilligan 1982, Ferguson 1984, Craib 1987, Shakeshaft 1986, Gray 1989, Hearn 1993, Connell 1995, MacInnes 1998, Sinclair 1998). These ranged from solitary, unilateral images like 'a rock in stormy waters' or a 'responsible parent' to collaborative images of 'colleagues, team-players or leading learners'. Respondents were asked to indicate the most appropriate image from a total range of thirteen for themselves. They were preceded by a prompt that read 'As principal of this school I see myself as...'.

The response rate was 73.4 per cent. Of these 51.1 per cent were male principals and 48.9 per cent female. Frequency analysis was used to identify key patterns of self-images (Burns 1994). Responses were first tabulated according to frequencies and then cross-tabulated according to the variables of gender, school level, sectoral identity, student gender and school size. The Pearson Test of Statistical Significance was used to determine statistical significance at the .05, .01 and .001 levels, which were unlikely to be a function of sampling error. This method also enabled analysis of data in the form of paired observations on two variables such as principal gender and school sector. The findings indicated the presence or absence of a relationship between the two variables.

The key findings are reported in detail in other publications (Collard 2001, 2003). A brief list of some attitudes and beliefs will have to suffice here:

- closer correspondence between the two genders in primary sites where principals endorsed collaborative leadership styles which contrasted with more bureaucratic and authoritarian attitudes in secondary sites;
- stronger emphasis upon personal-developmental goals in primary and girls-only sites;
- secondary leaders were more inclined to sanction teacher autonomy than their primary counterparts;
- a displacement of collaborative values in schools with more than 400 pupils;
- distinctively different values platforms in independent and Catholic schools; the former placing higher emphasis upon individuality and competition, the latter on collaboration and responsiveness to individual needs;
- a tendency for government school leaders to hold less optimistic perceptions of their student communities than those from the other sectors.

Interviews were also conducted with thirty of the questionnaire respondents and these helped illuminate the quantitative findings. For instance a strong discourse of resistance to centralised curriculum initiatives emerged from male and female government school leaders from both primary and secondary sites. One woman from a rural primary site insisted:

System authorities don't know what is best for students. Unless you're working with a particular environment, unless you're working with the people ... you can't make a decision about things, the decisions are too impersonal ... there are personal matters with particular children, with a school emphasis or in staffing that are more important than looking at programs or things that someone up above is saying 'thou must do this'.

Men from secondary sites echoed the sentiment and argued for 'a fine balance between centrally set broad guidelines and school-based curriculum development' or complained about 'grey, conforming, top-down CSF stuff'. Such antipathy to centralised curriculum mandates helped to explain their low level of identification with the image of line manager. Government leaders were very ambivalent about conforming to a professional image, although this image is common throughout other public sector domains.

A final stage mapped emerging patterns against evidence from historical accounts of schools from the three sectors. This enabled richer explanations to be developed than the empirical data could yield. Some findings only became fully comprehensible in the light of this historical perspective. Others indicated major conflicts or departures

from the past. As such the study illuminates both continuities and permutations in the professional self-images of Victorian principals in the past decade.

## Findings

The precise location of individuals in the complex schooling landscape appeared to exert a powerful influence upon their self-perceptions. Some images were also much more dominant than others. Those of 'leading learner' and 'initiator' were by far the most popular.

Item as principal of this school I see myself as	Preferred images
a leading learner	132 (19.2%)
an initiator	131 (19.1%)
a servant to the community	85 (12.4%)
a stable force	80 (11.6%)
an advocate for children	73 (10.6%)
a reliable colleague	66 (9.6%)
a line manager between school and system	29 (4.2%)
a voice of authority	25 (3.6%)
a custodian	22 (3.2%)
a rock in stormy waters	21 (3.1%)
a responsible parent figure	17 (2.5%)
a loner at the top	4 (0.5%)
a puppeteer	2 (0.3%)
<b>Total Images</b>	<b>687 (100%)</b>

**Figure 2: Preferred self-images of principals<sup>1</sup>**

However, those of 'servant, a stable force, an advocate for children and a reliable colleague' also had considerable appeal. The remainder only appealed to a small minority. Many of these were of traditional hierarchical images of authority and indicated that this sample did not readily identify with them. This was most evident with the images of isolated figures such as 'the loner' or 'puppeteer'.

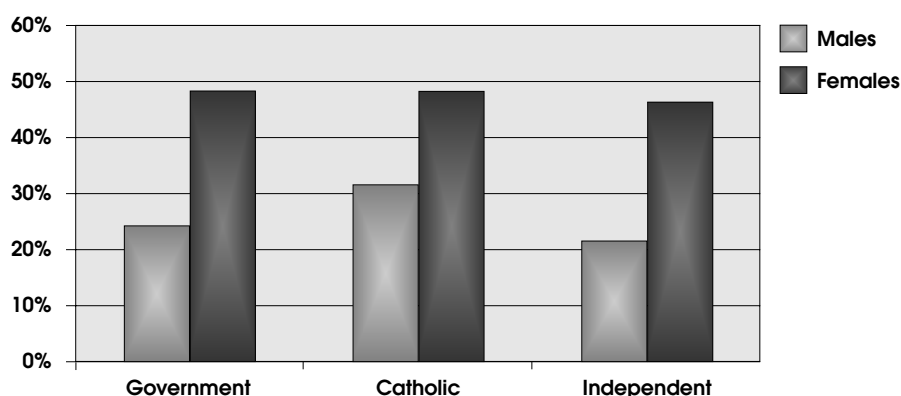
Sector, level and school size were all consistently associated with different self-images. Gender also appeared to have a strong influence. Men were more inclined to identify with images of solitary authority and women to perceive themselves as 'advocates for children and leading learners'. Such patterns were consistent with traditional portraits of men as patriarchs and women as nurturers in western societies

(Reynolds 1995). However, they were also consistent with the belief findings in other parts of this study which indicated that women were more strongly oriented to curriculum and pedagogical issues than their male counterparts (Collard 2001).

Primary leaders were more inclined to identify with collaborative images than secondary principals. Catholic leaders were the most inclined to identify with the images of 'leading learner' and 'servant'. Government leaders were more attracted to images of themselves as 'line managers', 'advocates for children' and 'stable forces'. Independent school leaders, especially the men, viewed themselves in more solitary terms than those from other sectors. The image of the 'initiator' held great appeal for both genders in this sector, rivalled only by images of stability. Principals from girls' schools were also highly likely to see themselves as 'initiators' and 'leading learners'. This contrasted with leaders from boys' schools who were more attracted to images of organisational control than educational leadership.

### Leading learner and initiator

Almost two-thirds of female principals perceived themselves as 'leading learners' compared to a little over a third of the men (62% compared to 38%). This supports claims that women leaders are more strongly oriented to learning than their male counterparts. When analysed according to sector, Catholic principals were significantly more inclined to identify with the image than their government or independent counterparts (41% compared to 34% and 33%). This difference was more a result of differences between men than between women across the sectors.



(Statistical significance: .001, 1 df)

**Figure 3: Proportions of men and women identifying with images of 'leading learner' by sector**



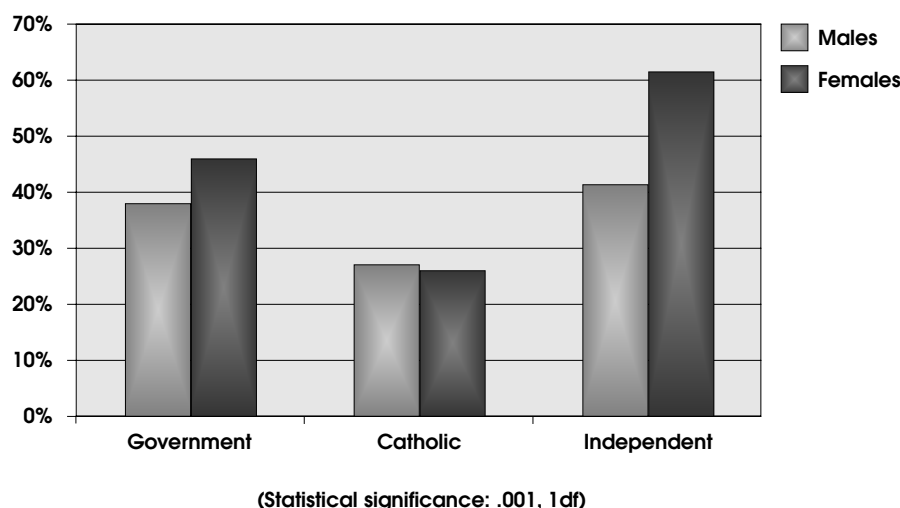
Other sections of this study indicated that commitment to continuous learning was strongest in the Catholic sector (Collard 2003). This appears to have led men from the sector to be more inclined to view themselves as adult learners than those from government and independent sites. The pattern suggests that lifelong learning, one of the most important emergent paradigms of the decade (Chapman and Aspin 1997), was more likely to find a responsive audience in principals in this sector. It is interesting to speculate that Catholic principals in the 1990s had been exposed to almost three decades of theological renewal stemming from Vatican II. One wonders if the climate within the church itself fostered an openness to continuous learning in male leaders which shaped their self-images and brought them into closer affinity with their female counterparts than in the other two sectors. If this is so it clearly suggests that religious culture can ameliorate broader gender patterns within Australian society.

A lower proportion of women from independent schools identified with the image of the 'leading learner' and this can be linked to the lower numbers of primary principals in the sector. Primary leaders were markedly more likely to identify with this image than their secondary counterparts (54% compared to 43%). They are more directly engaged with learning and teaching on a daily basis and the contrast therefore indicates how the characteristics of a level can differentiate self-images. It could be further argued that women from larger independent secondary schools are less likely to be directly engaged in classroom contact than their primary counterparts in other sectors and that this also modifies their self-concepts. The findings for women with regard to this image therefore appear to be an outcome of complex interactions between gender, sector, level and school size.

The contrast between the genders was much more moderate with the image of 'the initiator'. It has affinities with traditional notions of individuals leading from the front in a directive or charismatic manner. Surprisingly, men were only marginally more inclined to identify with it than women (51% compared to 49%). However, the differences according to sector were highly significant. Over half those from independent sites saw themselves this way.

The expectation that men are more inclined to view themselves as 'the initiator' was contradicted by the findings. The identification rate of the women within the independent sector was markedly higher than that of the men (61% compared to 41%). This suggests that women were more responsive to the autonomy sanctioned by this sector than the men. Other sections of this study indicate that they apply this initiative in the areas of curriculum and pedagogy (Collard 2003). Conversely, the men appeared more inclined to regard themselves as custodians of an established institutional order and its internal accountabilities (Collard 2003). In this sense the

men from independent schools appeared much more constrained by traditional patriarchal styles than men from Catholic schools. The contrast suggests that the more authoritarian cultures and traditions of independent boys' schools reinforce traditional leadership concepts which lock male leaders into conservative self-images and beliefs.



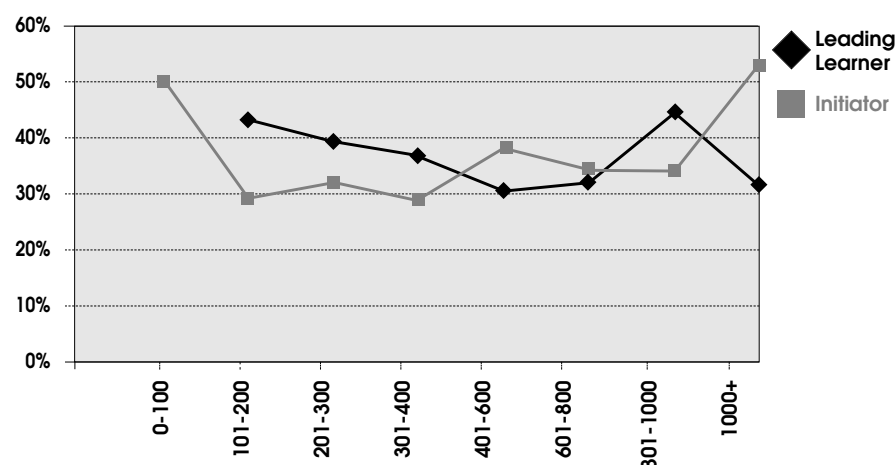
**Figure 4: Proportions of men and women identifying with images of 'initiator' by sector**

Government school principals were less inclined to view themselves as 'initiators' and this was consistent with traditional line-management structures in public bureaucracies and increased centralisation of curriculum policy in the government sector in Victoria in the 1990s. However, Catholic principals have traditionally exercised greater autonomy than their government counterparts and the fact that they were the least likely to view themselves as 'initiators' is therefore surprising. Events of the period may help explain their response. In 1994 primary principals in this sector received an unprecedented directive to participate in statewide testing and those who did not comply were subjected to considerable pressure. In 1996, the appointment of a conservative archbishop was accompanied by an insistence that new Guidelines for Religious Education be adhered to more rigorously than in the past. The decade was therefore one in which Catholic principals, especially those in primary schools, had their autonomy curtailed by the church bureaucracy. It is therefore understandable that they were less likely to perceive themselves as 'initiators' than had been the case in the past.

Leaders from girls' schools were slightly more inclined to identify with the 'initiator' image than those from coeducational and boys' sites (38% compared to 35% and 31%). In this sense the findings reinforce impressions from other sections of the broader study that the female leaders of girls' schools are the most passionate educational leaders (Collard 2001). This is further supported by the finding that almost half of them identified with the image of the 'leading learner' whereas those from boys' sites were much less inclined to do so (47% compared to 39%).

Primary leaders (51%) were more inclined to view themselves as 'initiators' than their secondary counterparts (44%). This implies that the smaller size of primary schools and the more direct engagement of principals in the daily life of the enterprise mean they may be called upon to exercise initiative whereas leaders in larger secondary sites are more likely to utilise bureaucratic structures and manage from a distance. It may also suggest that larger schools are less inclined to embrace change, that greater effort is needed to destabilise equilibriums within them than in smaller sites. However, any claims about the contrast between primary and secondary leaders also need to be cautious. Leaders from schools with between 101 and 300 pupils were the least likely to view themselves as 'initiators' whereas those from establishments with more than 1000 were the most likely to do so. Such complexity may suggest that the energies of leaders in small primary sites are consumed by the tasks of daily operation.<sup>2</sup> Initiative may become more possible as schools expand in size and are able to create specialised roles that provide principals with creative space.

The reverse pattern emerged with the 'leading learner' image. As school size increased principals were less likely to view themselves in this way.



**Figure 5: Proportions of principals identifying with images of 'leading learner' and 'initiator' by school size**

The contrary patterns indicate that the characteristics of the primary level and the relatively small scale of the schools combine to foster leaders' conceptions of themselves as learners. However, the culture and scale of government and independent boys' schools is likely to undermine such a view and replace it with an image of self as an organisational controller. The tendency for leaders from these sites to be more inclined to view themselves as institutional managers than curriculum and pedagogical leaders has strong implications for principal selection.

### **Other popular images**

Primary leaders were more inclined to view themselves as 'advocates for children' than their secondary counterparts. Identical proportions of male and female primary principals identified with this image (23%). Gender differences were more pronounced at the secondary level where 18 per cent of females and 14 per cent of males regarded themselves as 'advocates'. The differences suggest that primary leaders have more intimate knowledge of the needs of children in their schools and are willing to adopt supportive stances with them. One insisted:

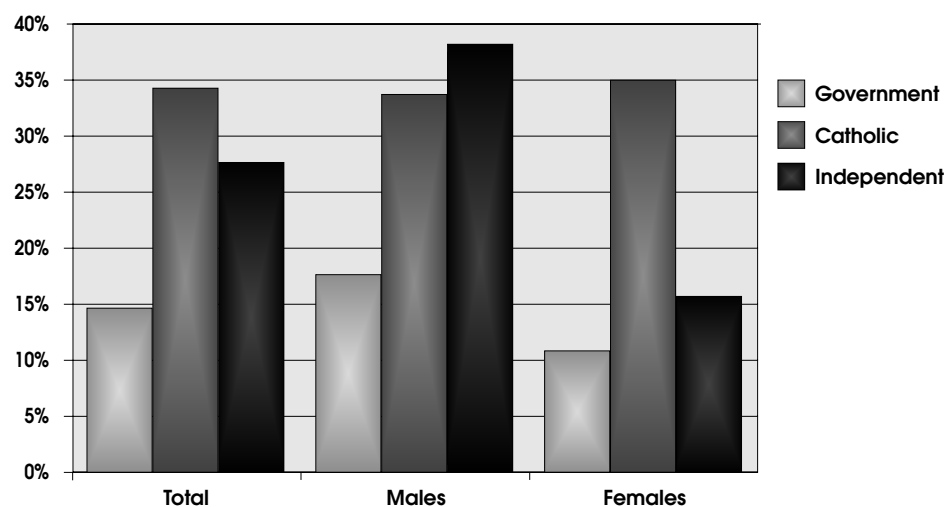
No matter what programs and everything else that you've got in your school, you can be the best resourced school, ... unless you've got a personal, one-to-one relationship with your child or your student you're not going anywhere.

Those in secondary schools are more likely to delegate welfare concerns to specialist coordinators, and are consequently less inclined to view advocacy as part of their role. The pattern suggests that the educational functions and scale of primary schools tends to draw the two genders into aligned self-images whereas the more segmented structures in secondary sites seem to promote greater variations and possibly reinforce traditional gender roles. Identification with a 'collegial image' was also higher at primary than secondary levels (22% compared to 17%). It is probable that the smaller scale of such sites generates a stronger sense of collegiality amongst principals and staff whereas the more impersonal structures of larger secondary schools militate against this.

Leaders from Catholic and government schools were more than twice as likely to identify with the image of 'children's advocate' than their independent school counterparts (35% and 30% compared to 15%). This may reflect the fact that they are more likely to service a broader population, especially those from less privileged backgrounds. As such, the different patterns echo the nature of the communities served by each sector and suggest that this can influence the self-image of particular leaders.

Almost a quarter of the leaders from girls' schools viewed themselves as 'stable forces' and this was three times the proportion from boys' schools (24% compared to 8%). One may be tempted to view this as an extension of traditional matriarchal roles for women as peacekeepers in domestic spheres. However the proportion from boys' schools needs to be interpreted in the knowledge that these leaders put the highest premium upon organisational control in the study (Collard 2003a). If they assume that their control is inviolable, they may see little need to stabilise contrary tensions within their institutions. If this is the case, their stance may reflect the patriarchal aloofness that feminists have critiqued in recent decades (Ferguson 1984). It may well be another indicator that male principals in such schools continue to view their roles through conservative lenses that privilege control over collaboration.

The images of 'servant to the community' and 'line manager' resulted in highly significant differences according to sector. As anticipated, the highest rates of identification with 'servant to the community' were in the Catholic and independent sectors. Such identifications are hardly surprising given that the image has a long history within Christian traditions that precede the popularisation of it in secular leadership theory in recent decades (Greenleaf 1977, Sergiovanni 1992).



(Statistical significance: 001, 1 df)

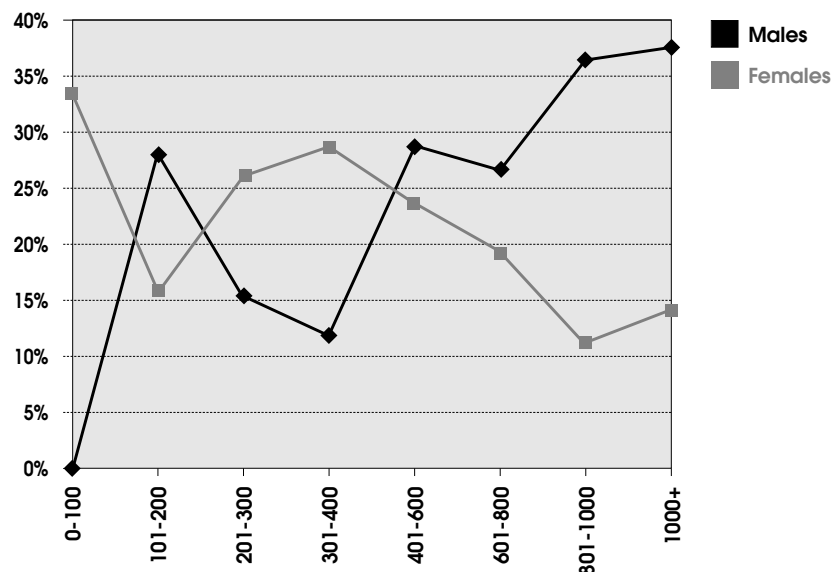
**Figure 6: Proportions who identified with the image of 'servant to the community' by sector and principal gender**

However, there were also important differences between the non-government sectors. Similar proportions of men and women from Catholic schools identified with the image (33% and 35%). This may well be an artefact of the priority Catholic education authorities give to the theological formation of their principals and indicates that such programs can draw male and female principals into shared self-images. By way of contrast, men from independent sites were over twice as likely to identify with the 'servant' image than women (38% compared to 15%). The explanation resides in the different histories of boys' and girls' schools within the sector. Many boys' schools have had clerical principals in the past, especially if they were founded as church schools. However, this has been less common in girls' schools, many of whom were founded as private cottage industries rather than religious institutes (Theobald 1996). Some have had very tenuous links with church authorities.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation was confirmed by the fact that identification with the image was higher in boys' than girls' schools (23% compared to 19%). Religious traditions therefore appear to have united men and women in Catholic schools but divided them in the independent sector. Indeed women from independent girls' schools were the least likely to see themselves as 'servants to a community'. Such a stance was accompanied by a lower regard for parent and community participation than that of any other group in this study, which became evident in interview statements like 'the idea of a parent-controlled school is absurd and that's what some of them are looking for'. This can also be traced to their evolution from cottage industries where strong matriarchs viewed themselves as inviolable to community pressure. The colourful conflicts between Jeanie McCowan, the proprietor of Mentone Girls Grammar, parents and an eventual board between 1937 and 1955 clearly illustrate this phenomenon (Burren 1984).

Women from the smallest schools were more likely to identify with the 'servant' image than those from larger sites. Many of these were likely to be principals from Catholic primary schools.

The reverse occurred in larger secondary schools where men were more likely to identify with the image and they were found to come from Catholic and independent schools. The choice of self-image was therefore a product of the interaction of many factors, including sector, student gender and size, and these all appeared to be more influential than principal gender.

Although only a small minority of principals identified with the image of 'line manager' it was at least four times more appealing to those from government schools (14%) than from Catholic and independent sectors (3% and 2%). Such a finding reflects the more pronounced bureaucratic structures in the government sector. It held stronger appeal for men than women from this sector (16% and 2%). This may appear to support Ferguson's (1984) claim that men are more bureaucratic than women.



**Figure 7: Proportions who identified with the image of 'servant to the community' by principal gender and school size**

However, the fact that more women than men from the Catholic sector identified with the image qualifies the universality of such a claim. It is also noteworthy that not one man from the independent sector identified with the image and this is testimony to claims that such male leaders are more attuned to large degrees of autonomous power in their workplace. We are therefore led to a more measured claim that men in public leadership may be more attuned to bureaucratic forms of leadership than their female counterparts. This does not appear to apply as strongly to the non-government sectors.

## Conclusions and implications

This study clearly illustrates that Victorian school principals perceived themselves in a variety of ways. They were not an homogenous group. Generalisations and stereotypes based on variables such as gender or sector should therefore be treated with great caution. Indeed, contextual factors such as inherited traditions, institutional histories, school level, size and student gender help generate a complex mosaic that belies simple generalisations. We need to develop nuanced theories of leadership that recognise the complexity and diversity of principal cohorts.

It appears that some groups of principals were more strongly influenced by tradition than others. Those from independent boys' schools were the most attuned to conservative images of themselves as solitary and autonomous leaders and men from

government secondary schools were the most likely to view themselves in traditional bureaucratic terms. In both cases it would appear that the authority and employment structures contribute to this conservatism. By way of contrast, female leaders were more attuned to collaborative images and were more responsive to contemporary leadership visions. This was particularly so if they came from primary or girls' schools. One is tempted to speculate that radical shifts in the role of women in Australian society over the past three decades have led them to be more open to collaborative forms of leadership whilst men embedded in traditional structures have been less responsive.

The distinct religious cultures that divided Australian schooling in the 1870s have abated and mutated but they have not disappeared. Religious cultures continue to exert a formative influence on the principals of Catholic and independent boys' schools. In the Catholic sector they appear to ameliorate differences between male and female leaders and draw them towards shared self-images. The reverse occurs in the independent sector where the less pervasive presence of religious traditions in girls' schools has meant that a progressive secular humanism has come to differentiate their leaders from the more conservative stance of their counterparts in boys' schools.

The Schools of the Future Program sanctioned increased autonomy and initiative for government school principals in Victoria in the 1990s (Caldwell and Haywood 1998). This study provides evidence that women from the sector were more responsive to such changes than the men. Their interview responses indicated strong patterns of resistance to another change: the increased centralisation of control over curriculum. System leaders were frequently caricatured as 'out of touch with local needs'. When read together, the two sets of responses indicate significant ambivalence amongst female principals in the sector. They valued increased administrative autonomy and simultaneously resented central intrusion into the curriculum realm. By way of contrast, a similar pattern in the independent schools can be viewed as women from that sector continuing to exercise their traditional autonomy rather than respond to parent agendas. In one sector, identification with the image of the 'initiator' was a response to change; in the other it was adherence to a cherished tradition. Such nuances point to the complexity of the terrain and the need for cautious interpretations of it.

The findings carry strong implications for principal development programs. Consultants and trainers in the field need to approach their work with sensitivity to diversity in the same way we now encourage teachers to respond to different intelligences and learning styles. Some principals will be more responsive to continuous learning and change than others. Some will be more resistant to centralised public directives and accountabilities than others. Those who place a high premium upon their professional autonomy or believe that local needs should be the primary drivers of provision are more likely to be in this category. It is clear that one size will not fit all! This may help to explain why



some of the leadership packages of the past have failed and it also has implications for the current wave of capability statements and attenuated credentialing in western democracies. Generic competencies may be valuable tools for systems but if the needs of specific community sites are overlooked they may distract leaders from responsiveness to local needs.

There are also clear implications for respective authorities, boards and selection panels. Those who seek to promote their schools as collaborative learning communities are more likely to find protagonists amongst female primary principals than male leaders from government high schools. Those who believe that charismatic leadership is needed could well look to the independent sector for recruits. Nor should it be assumed that all women leaders are necessarily more collaborative than men. There are strong traditions of authoritative femininity and stable control in independent girls' schools that contradict contemporary stereotypes of women leaders as relational, collaborative beings.

The finding that identification with the images of a 'leading learner' or 'advocate for children' decreases with school size also holds important implications. If authorities in large schools want principals to embody such values they need to look closely at providing structures to preserve them instead of relying solely on the attributes of individual leaders. Principals who are more strongly oriented to traditional forms of organisational control may not possess the flexibility and responsiveness required in some contemporary contexts.

In the final analysis a nuanced understanding of principal identity requires those of us who work in the field to develop a sophisticated framework that recognises that leadership involves complex interactions between a wide range of social variables and the specific context in which a principal leads. Contemporary theorists are placing increased emphasis upon leadership as a moral art (Hodgkinson 1991, Lakomski 1998) that involves discernment of values and options. This research suggests that principals, and those who seek to assist them, must be critically reflective practitioners who possess a sophisticated as opposed to a reductionist understanding of the forces at work.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It should be noted that many respondents ticked more than one image. This meant that the total number of images selected (687) was higher than the total number of respondents (371). The percentages in the table relate to the total number of identified images.

- <sup>2</sup> Many of the principals in schools with fewer than 300 pupils are engaged in classroom duties for much of their time.
- <sup>3</sup> With the exception of Methodist Ladies' College and Presbyterian Ladies' College the principals have generally been laymen or women. Indeed some girls' schools had to struggle to achieve affiliation with churches (see Fitzpatrick 1975, Gardiner 1977, Theobald 1978, Webber 1981, Zainu'ddin 1982, Burren 1984, Hansen 1986).

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